

Interview with Bertha Evans St. Pierre, World War II Navy nurse POW, Orlando, FL, 20 May 1992. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. (1904-2001)

Where were you born?

I was born in Portland, Oregon. You want to know the date?

No, you don't have to tell me that. I know better than to ask a woman when she was born.

Oh, it's all on record anyway.

When did you decide you were interested in becoming a nurse?

I've always wanted to be a nurse. So eventually I went into nurse's training in Good Samaritan in Portland, Oregon. After graduation I did private duty because we had the Great Depression. I worked in becoming skilled. I had a brother who was a doctor in the Medical Corps in the Navy. He said, "I don't know much about the Nurse Corps," but he said, "I think it might be a good idea. Why don't you look into it."

He was a doctor?

Yes.

What was his name?

Dr. Edward Evans. So, I applied. You wrote to the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery in those days. They sent me down to the recruiting station where they recruited the men. And that's where I had my physical. I passed my physical and then waited for orders and they came in November of '31.

I then went to Mare Island, CA, for indoctrination for 6 months. They had no training program as they have today. You were put on a ward with the senior nurse and learned the hard way. If you made mistakes you were told about it.

For the first year, I wasn't sure I wanted to stay in the Navy because they work differently than they do in civilian life. In civilian life, you do it the quickest and most efficient way to get your work done. In the Navy, it's by chain of command and I used to circumvent the chain of command if I wanted something done. And I stepped on the toes of the senior nurse and she turned me into the chief nurse of the station. So, I was called on the mat more than once. Finally I thought maybe I'd better resign; I don't belong in this outfit. "Well, now Bertha, you just take it easy," I thought, and finally after 1 year I had my vacation. I got a month, and I went home for the holidays. Then I was adjusted to it and I really started liking it and made a career out of it.

**So your first assignment was at the hospital at Mare Island?
And where did you go after that?**

In '33, President Roosevelt was going to balance the budget and so all those under 3 years service were going to be let go and that included me. And I didn't want to go. I enjoyed it. So, I was having my dental work done there at Mare Island, and the dentist told me to have my dad write to the senator on the Armed Services Committee, who my dad knew in Portland, and see what could be done about retaining me. He said, "I know they will tell you not to do it and they

say they will put 'P.I.' on your personnel jacket--Political Influence--but don't pay any attention to it. My sister did it for me when I was in China. I'd been out there so long and I couldn't get back, and that's the way I got home."

So I wrote to my dad and he went to see the senator. I can't think of his name now. I was let go but put on terminal leave. And when my leave was finished, I received a telegram from Washington, DC - "Would I care to come back to the Navy?" And I said I surely would.

So you were actually out?

I was out but not off the books. When my leave was finished I got orders to San Diego and I didn't lose anything because I was never officially off the books.

I spent 2 years at San Diego. Then they wanted dieticians for the Navy. They would take those nurses who were interested and send them to school for a year. So I was sent to Washington, DC, to the university for 1 year.

The George Washington University?

That's right.

So, they sent you there to learn to be a dietician?

Yes. Then when finished, I was into the groove of learning. I wanted to stay and round out my curriculum in order to get my credits and get a degree but that wasn't in the best interest of the Navy at that time. They had no such programs. So, I received orders to go to Chelsea, MA.

And when was that?

I was in Chelsea from '37 to February of '40.

What types of duties did you have there?

All dieticians were in the kitchen except for night duty. You took your tour on night duty regardless. And I enjoyed that area. New England is wonderful. Then from there I received orders for Washington, DC--the old Naval Hospital. I went there in February of '40. I was in the kitchen and I took care of diets for the sick officers' quarters and special diets for the enlisted men.

Where did you live there?

The nurses quarters were right there.

Did you live in the nurses quarters?

Yes.

Was there a dining room in there?

Yes, the nurses quarters had one.

Was it in the basement or the first floor?

The first floor.

That's now the Surgeon General's office.

That's an ancient building!

And you said the kitchen was there also for the nurses dining room?

Yes. It was in the basement.

They brought the meals up and you ate in the dining room. Wasn't there a little portico where you could look out?

Yes there was.

Where did you live in that building?

On the first floor.

The first floor up?

Yes. The first floor up.

So, it would have been the second floor.

I guess so.

Did you share a room?

No. We all had individual rooms.

The Naval Medical School was there also in the old observatory building.

Yes. You could look down to the Lincoln Memorial and we used to walk down there to visit the memorial and you could stare Lincoln right in the eye. It was beautiful.

How long were you there?

I was there just from '40 to February '41 when I received orders to Canacao.

That was in February of '41?

Yes. Orders to Canacao in the middle of the winter in DC. I went down to Newport News to board the ship. Then I went around through the Panama Canal to Mare Island and I had to stay there until April because the Henderson (AP-1) had to make a diaper run to Honolulu and back before I could board to go out to the Philippines. So, I did duty at Mare Island until it was time for me to be detached and meet the ship in San Francisco.

It took us 30 days to get to the Philippines because at that time the ship carried troops and it was just filled to the gunwales with troops going to meet the fleet in Honolulu.

Can you remember what the voyage was like?

Yes. It was 13 knots with a tail wind. It was the slowest thing that you ever were on. But I enjoyed it. Of course, we were filled with sailors going to Honolulu to meet the fleet. And we had Army officers aboard too. And that's where I learned about all the prospects of war. On the east coast there was not a word said about it. It was very quiet. They just didn't talk about it. I remember asking at the Bureau whether I should take all my gear out there. "Certainly. Make yourself comfortable. You have nice quarters and all that." And I did it to my sorrow.

Yes. You lost everything.

Yes.

Did you make a stop at Pearl Harbor?

Yes. I was 5 days in Pearl and then we stopped at Wake and there was another island out there.

Guam?

No. We got to Guam eventually but there were two little islands. One, I think was Midway. Yes. We went to Midway. We stopped and they took us ashore to show us the installations. We saw the famous gooney birds and saw all the water towers up in the air. The Army officers aboard the ship said, "That shows you that civilians are taking care of this. They wouldn't listen to us. The first thing the enemy would knock out in case of a war would be your water supply. On the way to Honolulu, I met some reserve officers that were called to active duty. One of them said to Helen Gorzelanski, the nurse I was traveling with, that he felt sorry us girls. He said, "You'll be eating fish heads and rice before you come home." I said, "Do you really think so?" And he said, "I know so." Then I started to wonder whether we were really going to be in a war?

We didn't actually go ashore in Guam because we had measles aboard. The people who were getting off had to be quarantined. So none of us could go ashore because we were quarantined for measles. The inhabitants of Guam were not inoculated and they didn't want to have a plague start there and kill them all. So I never got to see Guam.

Then when we arrived in Manila, the World War I fleet was there.

The World War I fleet?

Yes. That's all they had out there! I thought Oh my God! If we have a war we're sunk. And then from there I was taken to Canacao.

What was your impression of Manila?

Oh, it was wonderful, a beautiful city. I enjoyed Manila. The people were so nice. I went back and it's not the same.

So you went up to Canacao and...

I think they took us on a launch across from the ship to Canacao.

What was your impression of the hospital at Canacao?

Well, it looked nice but those radio towers were sticking up there and there were airplanes at Sangley Point. If we were going to have a war... Well, how would you feel?

Probably not very comfortable.

But I didn't dwell on that. I just had a real nice time. The nurses were all very cordial. But the doctors' families had all been sent back to the states. They were all gone when I got there in May. I think they left in October of 1940.

But, life went on and we had nice cocktail parties at the club and I liked my duty. I had Chinese help and I was very fond of the Chinese people. Well, we just worked and played, worked and played until D-day.

How did you hear that the war had started?

I heard at 6 o'clock in the morning. My boyfriend was a line officer at Cavite Navy Yard. He called me and he said, "Bertha, Pearl Harbor has been bombed. We've been up all night with the admiral." So, then I went around and told...awakened everybody that I could to tell them that we were at war with Japan because I had to go on duty at 6:30.

In the interim, we had drills for mustard gas. They gave us instructions about putting on your mask. And then we were issued Navy dungarees and the blue shirts because we didn't have anything to wear but white uniforms. But I don't think we wore them. Peggy [Nash] said she'd die before she'd wear those.

Had you been given any instructions before the war broke out on how to use a gas mask?

I don't think so. I think they brought the stuff over to the hospital after the war started-- the tin hats and the gas masks. When they came over and bombed Clark Field, that's the first time we heard the bombs. We were downstairs. They had cots for us. And we were wearing our dungarees. We had our helmets and our flashlights down beside our bunks. When we heard those bombs at Clark Field, we all rolled off the bed we were so excited. I remember I couldn't find my shoes, I couldn't find my helmet, couldn't find my flashlight for several minutes. They had quite a bit of bombing before they hit Cavite.

That was on 8 December when Clark Field was hit. Then on the 9th not much was going on, but then on the 10th the bombers came.

To Cavite.

Do you remember what that day was like?

I sure do. We were eating lunch in the nurses' quarters and my boyfriend was having lunch with us. And then all of a sudden we heard the sirens going off at noon--just a little past noon-- and then we all made a dive. There was no place to go except under our nurses' quarters and they had sand bags at the opening. That's all the protection we had. Then our house boys stayed out by the entrance. When they would see the formation of the planes coming, they'd say "Here they come." And we would hear all this bombing at Cavite. Then the ground would just come up like this after the bombing.

Did you hear the planes?

Oh, you bet. I won't forget them. All of a sudden they'd make a pass and then they'd come back in formation and our house boys would say "Here they come." We didn't know whether they were going to hit us or just stay there over Cavite. But they did not hit the ammunition depot in Cavite. Had they hit that, the concussion would have killed all of us.

In the interim, they had moved a lot of stuff out but they didn't get all of it out of the ammunition depot.

They hit one of the towers. I think it was the one closest to the hospital.

That I don't remember. When they were through, they sounded the "all clear" and we had to scramble to the hospital because they were bringing in all the wounded from Cavite.

What do you remember about that?

Well, we just picked up and ran over to the hospital. They were bringing them in and then they were in the hallways and in the beds. We were told to give a quarter [of a grain] of morphine to the patients in their beds. And those who had to go to surgery we lay in the hallways; there was no place to put them. And we worked all night as I recall. The surgeons worked just about all night to take care of all those who were badly injured. They were amputating and doing many things.

We made rounds of the patients. I remember checking the patients in the afternoon. I had a patient I was going over. In those days the nurses didn't wear stethoscopes. All we could do was just take their pulse. I just couldn't find a pulse on this chap. I just couldn't find a pulse anywhere and I called Margaret Nash over and I said, "Peg, see if you can get the pulse on this fellow and she couldn't. So, I said I guess he's expired so we called the corpsman in and he took the patient, draped him, and took him to the morgue. He got halfway to the morgue and the fellow sat up and said, "Where am I?" He was in shock. We didn't realize it. But he got along alright but we had to laugh having sent someone to the morgue that was alive. If we had had a stethoscope we could have heard the heart.

You worked all night?

Yes. We worked all night without food, and we stayed there at the hospital. We figured the Japanese would be back the next morning and bomb the hospital. We got most of the patients out of there that night. Those that we could move were all out by 8 o'clock next morning and were transported to Estado Mayor, an Army base right next to Sternberg Army Hospital. We were the last to leave. We took the Pan-Am crash boat over to the Army-Navy Club in Manila.

I remember that you nurses were pretty much scattered in little groups around the city, weren't you?

We had these Army/Navy surgical teams.

Wasn't Ann Bernatitus the one who went with the Army team down south toward Bataan?¹

Yes, that's right. And went up to Corregidor and got to Australia on a submarine.

What was Sternberg like? Was that a big hospital?

Oh, it was. It was a big hospital. We were there just a few days it seems to me, and we helped take care of the pilots that were bombed at Clark Field besides some of our own patients. We weren't there too long. When we moved, I went with the contingent up to the Seventh Day Adventist school at Balintawoc, north of Manila.

What do you remember about that experience?

We had a large trench dug there in front of the building. A Japanese fighter plane came over and started shooting. We all hit the ditch and my feet and my face were right in the dirt.

¹ Ann Bernatitus went south to Bataan with an Army surgical team, eventually got to Corregidor, and escaped to Australia aboard USS Spearfish (SS-190).

And he made two passes. I don't know if he wanted to kill us or just he wanted to scare the living daylights out of us. Maybe I shouldn't say this, but our executive officer hit the trenches before we did.

Was the trench dug for that purpose?

Evidently. Maybe they dug it before we arrived.

It wasn't long thereafter that MacArthur declared Manila an open city and you saw everybody leaving...the whole Army was leaving the city except you people.

We were at Balintiwoc when Manila was declared an open city. Then we came back and went to Santa Scholastica. I remember asking where our Navy was.

Never mind where the Navy was. Where was the Army? They left too.

Yes. Because they didn't have anything to defend the place with even though... I'm talking out of turn.

No, you can speak honestly. It's pretty well known that they left you over there with nothing to fight with.

MacArthur said, "We will defend the Philippines." and all that. He took his family out to Corregidor and they went out on a submarine. We had nothing to defend ourselves with and they didn't let the pilots at Clark Field take to the air and they were strafed on the ground. It was awful.

Yes. That was a big mistake.

MacArthur didn't believe in the Air Force; it was the Army. Well, times had changed. I don't think he moved quite fast enough. There were several of those young officers--90-day wonders--they put on those transports with us. I don't think they ever came home. They were sweet kids.

These were the young Army Air Force pilots.

Yes. Because they went out to Clark Field.

Do you remember the day the Japanese came in?

I remember when they came to Santa Scholastica. Navy officers came and they all spoke beautiful English and they were all educated in the states. They were very nice and very solicitous and told us they would do what they could. Of course, when they left, the Army took over and then they were a little different.

These first Japanese who came were Navy?

They were Navy from the Navy ships. Well, they were graduates of Stanford and all down the coast. Spoke beautiful English. They had a very warm feeling to the United States. It wasn't the Navy that wanted the war. It was the Army.

So, after they left the Japanese Army came and they were nasty.

Well, they weren't as sociable and as nice as the Navy and most of them didn't speak English except a few officers. But they set up a contingent right in front of the conservatory of

music with a machine gun pointed towards the building. There were Japanese soldiers around it right in front of the entrance. We had nothing. We were noncombatants. And then they patrolled around the grounds at certain times.

I was in the kitchen there and took care of the diets and we got the food there.

Where did you get the food?

Filipinos that were at the convent got the food for the sisters. I never left the building.

Then from there, you all went to Santo Tomas?

Yes, after they bombed the port area. They bombed that every day and we'd all have to get in the lobby of the conservatory. Then some of the German sisters would come out and sit with us in that old building. The whole place would just shake and then we'd get the all clear signal. We were there at Santa Scholastica quite a while. We were there until March. I hated to leave Santa Scholastica. We had nice private rooms and nice quarters.

So you were at Santa Scholastica when the Japanese came and they're the ones who moved you to Santo Tomas?

Yes. I talked to the young soldiers. They had English/Japanese dictionaries and would talk to us. They used to ask me my name and how old I was. And I'd say 50 years old. They would say, "Do you have any children?" I would say no and then they would say, "Oh so sorry." One morning I got some sugar and chocolate and made fudge for the crew. I was getting ready to offer it to all the boys who worked in there--the cooks and so forth--and this Japanese sergeant came in. He was in charge of the boys out front with the machine gun so I offered him a piece before any of the rest of us had any. And he looked at it and he looked at me and he pointed at the candy and then he pointed to me to take a piece. He wanted to be sure it wasn't poison. And then when everything was O.K., he took the whole plate so none of the rest of us got any.

That night over in quarters, before we retired--our shades are all darkened--I heard this thump of a gun on the tile. This Japanese was saying "Oh oriental girl. Oh oriental girl." Once upon a time my eyes didn't exactly slant up but they had kind of an Oriental look before my surgery. And I said, "Oh lord, he means me," and I didn't want to go out but he kept at it. So I had to go out and he said "Oh hey oriental girl." He had a great big basket of fresh fruit. He was the one that took my candy so he brought me fresh fruit in exchange.

So for the most part, the guards in Santa Scholastica didn't bother you very much?

No. Our corpsmen set up a net they had gotten from the school and played volleyball. The guards put down their guns and went over and played with our corpsmen. And then the sergeant came and saw them. Oh, he just lambasted them for relinquishing their guns. Those poor guards got slapped in the face. They were just a homesick bunch of kids.

From there we went to Santo Tomas.

What do you remember going in the gate of that place?

Well, they had to examine all our luggage and they had the rest of our stuff all out there on the campus. We had to sleep on mattresses on the ground floor the first night. They hadn't arranged for us get rooms. So we slept all night on the ground floor. We just had mattresses. I think it was inside on the floor. Yes, I remember because it was kind of hard sleeping. Then we got our room with our beds and all that. And then we had all of the internees there.

There were lots of internees there--all kinds of people.

Oh, you bet. From prostitutes on up.

There were priests and nuns and business people.

Not at that time. The priest came in from the outside and said mass every Sunday. They came in once and a while and they weren't interned until we went to Los Banos. We had about 3,000 people there at Santo Tomas.

They had a little hospital for the students but we turned it into a hospital for the internees. It was a beginning. Eventually, they opened up another building when the Army nurses came in and we worked in the hospital.

But you didn't have much to work with as far as medicines or instruments were concerned.

No, we didn't have much. If we had surgery, they sent you out to St. Luke's because I had to go out to St. Luke's and have surgery.

And who would do the surgery at this hospital?

He was Chinese, Filipino, Spanish--he was a mixture--a very young man and a very good surgeon. He was trained by the Army and he worked there at St. Luke's.

Do you remember what your living conditions were like at Santo Tomas?

Well, we had this one big room with about 57 people living there. Our beds were in a line with mosquito netting on top.

And the toilet was outside?

You'd have to go down to the first floor.

There was one toilet for all of you?

Well, they had a string of them on the first floor but you had to get in line and take your turn because they had so many internees for the number of toilets. Then the showers, well Lord sake, there was a string of them but there were so many people. There were usually four or five people around one shower. There was no privacy.

No privacy at all?

So, Peg [Nash] and I used to get up at 4 o'clock in the morning and go down and take our shower when no one was around. She'd get at one end and I'd get at the other and we had our own privacy and then we'd come back and go to bed and get up at 6 or whatever time they wanted us to get up.

Was there some kind of reveille or you just got up on your own?

We had to be over to the hospital but I don't remember. Of course, we were in the back corner where we could hear all the racket in the kitchen going on and that might have awakened us. Of course, the other place, [Los Banos] was different; we had to stand roll call.

I know I've seen a photograph of you all out in the prison yard or whatever washing your hair. They had shower spigots set up.

Yes, they had an old bathtub. They had a pipe over the top of it with three shower heads. That's where we washed our hair.

Then they had all these troughs along where you did your washing. I thought it was hard on the women that were out there with their families because they had to dip the wash in those troughs.

There wasn't much inter-relationship between the Japanese and the inmates at this place because you had your own little government, the committee, remember that?

That's right.

And the committee dealt with the Japanese. So somewhere along the line the Japanese decided to move you. But before we get to that I want to ask you one other thing about being a nurse in these conditions. What was it like having to nurse people when drugs and instruments were not very plentiful and the conditions were crowded? What kinds of diseases did you treat?

Well, we had what they called break bone fever--dengue.
We had diarrhea, dehydration, malaria.

And there were no drugs to treat any of this?

Well, they had some in the beginning.

Then you ran out of them.

Then they ran out.

And then the food.

We got food in Manila before we went to Los Banos. But it wasn't too bad for an internment camp.

Then they decided to build this new prison at Los Banos and you all went there.

Yes, Dr. Lynch asked our chief nurse [Laura Cobb] if she would bring her Navy nurses to Los Banos with 800 men to set up a new camp and she said yes.

What was moving day like?

We didn't have much to take but we had to hunt and get our library done. We had a library at Santo Tomas. The people donated books and we used to take turns and people would pay 5 centavos a day to check out a book. Yes, that gave us extra money. We didn't have any money. And we got the books that we had brought. We had to check them in and check them out and when they became dilapidated we tried to repair them. We must have had about 200 books or better. Somehow we got them down to Los Banos, I don't remember how. I remember we had our bags by the train. We had to open them and then the Japanese rifled through our luggage. I don't know what they thought we had.

You went on a train?

It was a cattle car sort of a thing. We had to stand up all the way. And it was hot. It was all iron and they had the doors closed. It was terrible.

Then we finally got there and they took us by truck up to Los Banos. Then they set us by the bungalows on a little knoll. They gave us drinking cups with sake. They had the photographer there taking pictures for propaganda showing us happily drinking sake before we ever went to work.

When you got to Los Banos you had to build the place.

The men built all the barracks. If they got sick or hurt we'd take care of them. I just don't recall how we got fed there. They must have had a kitchen. I can't remember who did the cooking? We just had one spigot for water but they told us not to drink it without boiling it. But we didn't. We just drank it and no one got sick. Finally, we took over the infirmary for the hospital.

Did Laura Cobb determine who would get what chores to do, who would be on duty? Did you have a rigid schedule?

Yes. We worked every day. I worked in the kitchen. I had a cook and our food was very good in the beginning.

You grew a lot of your own food?

Well, they gave a plot of ground to the Dutch fathers and they grew fresh vegetables. Some also came from outside the camp. They brought these to the main kitchen for the internees and we got some for the patients too. There were about six of those Dutch fathers from Holland. And they grew all of this food. They worked daily. I knew a little father who used to come every morning into the kitchen and greet us. Finally, one day he came in and said, "You know, spring is sprung, the moon is ris, I wonder where our bombers is." He always kept our spirits up in the kitchen because he came every morning and brought fresh things for the patients. But most of the food went to the main camp in our stew.

Most of the things went to the main camp?

To feed the internees, to feed all of us.

Wasn't Los Banos an agricultural college?

Yes it was.

So there were some buildings there already. You just had to build more to accommodate the prisoners.

Oh, they built 18 or 19 barracks. We had a good 3,000 or more people there too.

You slept in rows?

We slept in one of the bungalows. I guess they were dorms or what. Eventually, we moved down to the infirmary which the students used and we took over the basement where the kitchen was. On the other side was one big room and that's where we were housed and it had one bathroom. We had roll call every morning at 7 o'clock.

How did that work?

You had to be out in front. Then they came.

The Japanese came and you stood there in line and they called out your name. Wasn't that called "tenko?" They had a name for that.

I think they had one of the civilians call our names and they checked them off as you answered your name. Oh, every morning we had to be out there 7 o'clock. Then as soon as they finished I had to get back into the kitchen to start getting the food ready for breakfast.

So they counted the 11 of you.

Yes, there were 11 of us counting the chief nurse because Ann [Bernatitus] was gone. The whole camp went through the same ritual.

Did you all get along fairly well?

Very well. We all got along well.

How were you starting to feel about being in prison? Did you wonder when and if you were ever going to get out of there and if the Americans were going to come back?

I sure did. But I just felt...I said I'm going to make it. I'm not going to die out here in this place, but I didn't know how I was going to do it. But, yes, sure you had your days of depression wondering if they were ever going to come. What has happened to our forces? Well, I kept it to myself but I usually got up in the middle of the night when we lived up in the bungalow. We had a little place under the house there. It was kind of dug out and it had a table. I used to get out and sit there and think about home and what was going on.

You had no contact with home at all at this point. In fact, the people at home didn't know whether you were dead or alive.

No. My mother heard that I was missing in action. Once in Los Banos they gave us some mail from home. They gave it to the Englishmen and the other nationalities but not to the Americans. And we just got it once. Once they gave us cards to fill out and send home. That was only one time.

Food was getting pretty scarce too after a while.

You're darn tooten it was. They wouldn't let it come in. It was a lack of food. They wouldn't let it come in the front gate when the war started turning against them. Then they put out this propaganda about how well they were doing and the American planes were using rice balls for gunpowder and all that stuff. But we weren't that stupid.

You didn't know what was happening in the rest of the world at this time.

Once in a while we did. There was radio set up by the men. I don't know who they were and I never asked any questions. They would get word from the outside. They had to be very careful, very cautious. So sometimes the word would get circulated around to us but they didn't want anyone to know that they had this contraband. We heard about Jimmy Doolittle.

You heard about the Doolittle raid?

Yes.

That was pretty early--in April 1942.

Yes, that was early. Then we got some magazines in Los Banos that came from some submarines from somewhere. It was stateside stuff.

How did you hear about the Doolittle raid?

I don't know but we got it.

But you heard that Tokyo had been bombed. How did you feel about that? Pretty good I bet?

Wonderful. I just wished we had bombed the whole empire at that point. Yes. We used to watch the bombers leave Manila every day to go out to Corregidor before it surrendered. You could see it. It was terrible.

So you started to get this feeling either through this contraband or radio...

This first time we knew things were going our way was in September [1944] when a great big American bomber that had all these fighter planes around it and it came over our camp. We couldn't wave or do anything but they let us know they hadn't forgotten us. Lord, that was wonderful to look at.

It was an American bomber.

An American bomber with the fighter planes just all circling around. And there weren't any Japanese planes around.

Could you see the insignia on the wings?

On the fighter planes you could see...was it a white star or something...I just don't remember. But it was the most beautiful September day and the sun was bright. Twice fighter planes flew over our camp. They came low enough. We could see them and they'd waggle their wings at us. We couldn't say hello or anything because the guards were there. But we knew they were saying, "That's just to say we know you're here." It wasn't until the 23rd of February that all hell broke loose.

What do you remember about the day of your rescue?

Oh, it was wonderful. These men came and gave us C-rations and...

Where were you and how did you know there was something going on?

When the paratroopers dropped from the sky, we actually saw what was going on. Then we heard a lot of machine guns, a lot of bullets. I flew down to the basement and sat up against a concrete wall. All the bullets were flying around. The guerrillas were already there and killed the Japanese sentries that were stationed around the campus. When the paratroopers dropped down, the Japanese were doing their morning calisthenics. They did that every morning just before we took roll call at 7. All the guns were stacked outside and that's when it all took place. Well all the fighting...the bullets were just a zipping. You didn't know where it was coming from so I just sat on the floor and stayed there. Then, eventually, I saw a big tank come into the camp and my cook said it had a meat ball [Japanese rising sun insignia] painted on the side. I said, "Oh, gosh. It can't be that." And I said, "That's no meat ball, that's a white star!" And that's when the the American soldiers came in and gave us C-rations and told us to get moving.

And you all walked down to the lake.

I did. The older people went on the amtracks. They sent Peg by motorcycle in a sidecar with a little newborn baby.

I walked. There were reporters from all the newspapers right in camp when we were marching out and they asked me where I was from. The guerrillas had a big part in this. They don't mention them too often, but the Filipino guerrillas should be commended for what they did. They traveled all night and got behind the sentry boxes. They were the ones that shot the sentries and got everything moving so the paratroopers could drop down and come into camp. And then they all lined up for us. We walked among them and they sang their national anthem. I was quite moved.

You were down on the beach then by the lake...

We had to walk almost 2 miles to the bay. I thought I was free until I heard gunfire zipping around but none of us was hit. I had a pound of brown sugar I was carrying in my tin can. Then when we got down to the beach, I gave it to the guerrillas because I thought I wouldn't need it anymore. I bought that and kept it. A lot of black market went on in camp.

So you were down on the bay there and then they got the amtracs and took you over to New Bilibid.

Yes.

And then from there, you had that big reception hosted by ADM [Thomas] Kinkaid.

No. From there we went back to Santo Tomas for a few days until they flew us down to Leyte.

[Herman shows Mrs. St. Pierre photos of the newly freed nurses]

So that's when you had the big reception.

They had a nice dinner for us.

You hadn't seen so much food in years. Were you very hungry? How did you handle all of that?

Well, when we came to New Bilibid they fed us. They had a big tub of stew. It was the best stew I ever ate. I sat right down beside it and just filled my plate. They said not to eat too much. I was careful. I wasn't hungry when I had this big reception because I had a lot of food at Bilibid and then at Santo Tomas.

Then the big reception was several days after your rescue?

Yes. A good week or better. That was quite a dinner. They were all very nice and we had cocktails before. Laura Cobb said, "Now, my girls haven't had any liquor." As if we didn't know that we hadn't had any liquor. I wasn't interested in the cocktails anyway.

I remember coming off that plane when Gladys Smith greeted me and hugged me and I wanted to get on down. And the newspaper photographers said do that again. I wanted to say, "Go jump in the lake." I was getting tired of being told what to do. I obliged them but I thought, "It's all beginning again."

This was taken at Leyte [shows photo] and Mrs. [Dorothy Still] Danner had just fainted.

I never fainted. But I remember when we were on Leyte there was this little enlisted sailor. He had something to do with the commissary. I remember he asked what we'd like for dessert and I said, "Oh, what have you got?" He took Peg [Nash] and me down to the commissary in a "side car". He gave us a piece of apple pie and vanilla ice cream. Oh, was that wonderful. So, we sat down there and ate.